

## Connolly on Charles-Wurtz and Wulf, eds. (2016)

Charles-Wurtz, Ludmila, and Judith Wulf, editors. *Lectures des Contemplations*. PU de Rennes, 2016, pp. 312, ISBN 978-2-7535-5171-8

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Victor Hugo composed *Les Contemplations* (1856) over the course of more than two decades, a period which included transformational personal and public events such as the death of his daughter in 1843, of Juliette Drouet's daughter in 1846, the revolution of 1848, and the *coup d'état* of 1851. This collection of sixteen articles comes at a time of heightened interest in *Les Contemplations*, due in large part to its inclusion in the 2017 *agrégation*, as studies by Sylvain Ledda and Esther Pinon ("*Multiplier l'infini*": *étude des Contemplations de Victor Hugo*, Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre–CNED, 2016), and by Marine Wisniewski, Violaine Boneu, and Florence Balique (*Les Contemplations de Victor Hugo*, Atlande, 2016) demonstrate. This volume distinguishes itself from its competitors above all through its richly varied approaches to individual poems and to larger themes.

The book is divided into five sections. In the first—"Genèse"—Jean-Marc Hovasse describes the genesis of a poem first written and given to Delphine de Girardin in 1840. On her death at age fifty-one in the summer of 1855, Hugo prepared the poem for publication—this time as an elegy—applying small modifications, deftly presented here for the first time. Pierre Laforgue traces the disappearing figure of Olympio in the collection that was to have been titled *Les Contemplations d'Olympio*. The name is explained with reference to a note in which Hugo describes his "moi" as decomposing into four figures: Herman, who represents love, Maglia, who is laughter, Hierro, who is combat, and Olympio, who is the poet's lyre (34). Laforgue identifies Olympio in dialogue with Herman in "À quoi songeaient les deux cavaliers dans la forêt" (44). Other sightings are located in the interstices of poems such as "Pleurs dans la nuit," "Relligio," and "Veni, vidi, vixi."

Although Claire Montanari's piece is the last of this opening section, there are good reasons why it should instead have appeared first. It is Montanari who first informs the reader in detail of the discrepancies between the collection's real and fictional geneses. For example, the only poem in the collection composed during the three years following Léopoldine Hugo's drowning—"Le poète s'en va dans les champs"—is misleadingly dated June 1831. Consecutive poems dated January 1834 ("Réponse à un acte d'accusation") and June 1855 ("Suite") impute a long-term coherence to Hugo's thought and beliefs, but the poems were, in fact, composed a month apart in the fall of 1854 (73).

"Poétique"—the second section—begins with an article first published in 2007, in which Florence Naugrette undertakes a bold pseudo-ekphrastic reading of "Mes deux filles." She proposes that instead of seeing *Les Contemplations* as a cathedral, or tomb, or pyramid (a simultaneously religious and funerary metaphor preferred by Hugo), we should read it as an instance of imaginary ekphrasis, and specifically as an album of photographs (90). In a well-informed study, David Galand argues for the continuing pertinence of genre in reading these poems, and specifically of the elegy. Filip Kekus sets the poems in the broader context of contemporaneous literary trends, arguing for the central place of the fantastic in Hugo's inspiration and aesthetic. This article would benefit from the focus afforded by a close reading of one of Hugo's poems. As it is, the only poem reproduced in its entirety and read closely is Gérard de Nerval's "Vers dorés," a poem so well-known it hardly needs reproducing here (126).

Drawing on Louis Aragon's *Hugo, poète réaliste* (1952), in which the "humanitarian romanticism" of *Les Châtiments* (1853) is identified, Bertrand Degott enquires whether such realist concerns might also be found in *Les Contemplations*. Through a series of rapid close readings he shows how the poems are shot through with realistic descriptions of nature (140). Such fragments—"un troupeau bête, une cloche tinte" ("Écrit sur la plinthe d'un bas relief antique")—are proposed as evidence of *sermo pedestris*, the translation of common reality without the artifice of rhetoric (140).

In part three—"Métaphysique"—Jean-Claude Fizaine powerfully addresses the strains of spirituality running through the collection, although his article is marred by numerous typographical errors (happily absent from the rest of the book) and occasional digressions (on the meanings of "Republican" in American politics). In the spirit of the preface to *La Légende des siècles* (1859–83)—which Hugo describes as "[u]ne espèce d'hymne religieux à mille strophes, ayant dans ses entrailles une foi profonde et sur son sommet une haute prière" (213)—and drawing at some length from a contemporary review by George Sand, Fizaine invites us to see how these poems operate as prayers in a new, hybrid spirituality. Yvon Le Scanff explores the limits and possibilities of the representation and figuration of nature in the poems, and is the only reader to draw on their erotic undertow, proposing "Mugitusque boum" as the best example of this.

In part four—“Formes”—Ombeline Charrier also turns to this poem in her examination of Hugo’s Latin intertext, as it draws its title from book two of Virgil’s *Georgica*. In contrast to his classical forebear, though, Hugo sees in the idyllic landscape evoked the possibility of a new equitable social order founded on love and desire. Brigitte Buffard-Moret examines how Hugo revolutionizes French versification, and includes a brief history of its classical features. Although an important intervention, not enough effort is made to explain the specific nature of Hugo’s versification in *Les Contemplations*, beyond quoting the manifesto included in “À André Chenier”: “Prendre à la prose un peu de son air familier” (260). Judith Wulf writes well on the various ways that the “je” of Romanticism slips from sight.

In “Effets de perspective”—the final part—Steve Murphy offers a quick-witted, socially aware (if speculative) microreading of “Le Mendiant.” Ludmila Charles-Wurtz explores the line of dots that follows the date of Léopoldine’s death—in between the second and third poem of book four—as a positive representation of what cannot be represented, and as repeating and rendering more complex the abyss that separates “Autrefois” from “Aujourd’hui.”

I wonder whether more space might have been accorded to dissenting voices, also an important part of Hugo’s reception. Aragon speaks of the “infamous relief” felt by Hugo’s peers upon his death (154) and Paul Verlaine writes that everything from *Les Châtiments* onwards “m’emplit d’ennui, me semble turgescence...” (154). Murphy’s contribution is perhaps the only one that gestures in this more subversive direction. Finally, I wonder whether these essays provide enough sense of the future direction of studies of Hugo’s poetry.

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